

Stepping Outside Your Comfort Zone

When I graduated from Crane in 1993, my goal was to become a high school band director. My first job was in a tiny rural district in the Adirondacks teaching a 7-12 grade band, as well as a chorus, jazz ensemble, middle school general music, and elementary band.

Over the next 20 years, the job description remained the same, even as I changed districts. However, budget cuts in 2013 forced me to absorb the K-5 general music classes and I suddenly found myself planning for classes I hadn't taught since student teaching!

NYSSMA® to the rescue

Feeling overwhelmed, I dug out books and materials that had been gathering dust since college, contacted NYSSMA® colleagues for curriculum maps, pored through conference session handouts, and tried to figure out where to begin. My own elementary music experience was Kodaly-based. I had fond memories of this and I knew that years of solfege had been beneficial in college aural skills courses. It seemed logical to begin with this approach.

Those first two years were way outside of my comfort zone. As much as I loved being a student in a Kodaly classroom, I did not enjoy teaching with that approach. After years of teaching the older students, I knew what I wanted them to know by the time they reached middle school but getting them there was my new challenge. Those 39-minute weekly classes were mostly planned on a week-to-week basis, with a lot of trial and error as I tried to find my rhythm.

I had the beginnings of a good Orff instrument inventory in my classroom, and incorporating instruments and working on ensemble skills was in my wheelhouse. So, I leaned in to this. I was constantly reading, researching and honing my skills as I tried to build a curriculum that would work for me and my students.

NYSSMA® conferences were a wealth of information, as I was able to learn from the wonderful headliners, as well as the many amazing teachers throughout the state who

volunteer to present. Some of my favorite sessions were the folk dancing ones.

Movement had always been a struggle for me, and learning how to teach these dances opened up a new element to my curriculum. I attended Dalcroze and GIML sessions, which helped me gain confidence in my own expressive movements. These experiences stretched me even further out of my comfort zone, but I realized the challenges were also bringing new energy and joy to my teaching across the board.

A lightbulb moment

Those first six years of teaching K-12 music were full of discovery, trial and error, but I still lacked focus. Then, several things happened in rapid succession. I attended a summer conference where Diane Lange was the headliner and learning about her combination approach of Orff and Music Learning Theory was a lightbulb moment for me.

Secondly, our district merged with the neighboring district and a reconfiguration of buildings and staff meant that I could now focus solely on PK-5 music and I would get to see the kids more frequently. Then COVID hit, and I suddenly found myself in the world of virtual learning.

Although I was no stranger to technology, there were a lot of new skills to tackle. I dove into YouTube tutorials on using PowerPoint, Google Slides and Screencastify so I could create interactive materials and record and edit videos for asynchronous learning. Again, this was way out of my comfort zone, but by the time we returned to in-person learning, I had acquired numerous skills that have continued to serve me well!

During this transition from remote learning back to in-person classes, I had the benefit of developing and honing skills by watching videos that other MLT (Music Learning Theory) teachers had posted on YouTube for their students. I found that teaching with the MLT approach challenged my own musicianship. On the way to school, I would improvise melodies in various modes and soon I was writing my own songs for my classroom.

I was feeling creative, energized and excited about going to work every day. I discovered that teaching elementary music, something I had never expected to do, had become my new passion.

The rewards of change

With this new focus and direction, I wrote curriculum maps and electronic lesson plans that could be updated from year-to-year. As units were planned and materials were organized, I felt like I was finally in my comfort zone. However, I started to question some of my repertoire as I measured it against belonging, equity, diversity and representation standards and practices. I removed and replaced songs, even though many of them had been childhood favorites (and therefore "comfortable"), because it was the right thing to do.

A few years ago, I decided to challenge myself to add a mini unit during Hispanic Heritage Month. I had never studied Spanish, but a student teacher in the district spoke it fluently and helped me learn the correct pronunciations. I did my best to gather songs and materials that were authentic representations and worked hard to prepare for that week of teaching.

I remember being so nervous for the first class. As I started singing *Los Pollitos* to my kindergarteners (hoping I would remember all the words!), one of my students exclaimed, "My grandmother sings that to me!" (I discovered later that her grandmother lives in Peru). Knowing that one of my students felt represented in that moment was a wonderful reward for stepping outside that comfort zone.

I am now 31 years into my teaching career. The journey, though bumpy at times, has made me a better teacher and has kept my work fresh and exciting. I can happily say that I am where I am supposed to be, even though it is not where I planned to be. I am proud to be an elementary classroom music teacher who continues to embrace the challenges of stepping outside my comfort zone. ||